since the plays were written as farce or comedy, the Irish playwrights appear to have felt that the only way to succeed in England was to submit to this tradition.

2. Carleton, Synge, O’Casey and Autobiographical Accounts: Aspiring ‘Authenticity’

Characters like Captain Macmorris, Teague, Captain O’Blunder or Sir Lucius O’Trigger called for an answer. In Ireland, an occupied country, which had been defined and controlled from the outside for decades and whose representatives on stage were designed to please English audiences, writers started to oppose these stereotypical characterisations by inventing their own images. In his popular play *The Playboy of the Western World*, John Millington Synge took the traditional role of the stage-Irishman to the extreme. Nevertheless, Synge did not just denounce the stage-Irishman as fantasy; in some of his narratives, he also tried to offer a realistic account of what he perceived as true Irishness. Synge, together with authors such as William Carleton, deliberately moved away from the stereotypical rendering of the Irish people. Carleton regarded the stage-Irishmen as an invention of the ignorant English. In his “Autobiographical Introduction” to the *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*, published between 1842 and 1844, he rejects the stage-Irishman and is quite outraged by the character traits ascribed to the Irish:

From the immortal bard of Avon down to the writers of the present day, neither play nor farce has ever been presented to Englishmen, in which, when an Irishman is introduced, he is not drawn as a broad grotesque blunderer, every sentence he speaks involving a bull, and every act the result of headlong folly, or cool but unstudied effrontery. I do not remember an instance in which he acts upon the stage any other part than that of the buffoon of the piece, uttering language which, wherever it may have been found, was at all events never heard in Ireland, unless upon the boards of a theatre. [...] [T]hey [i.e. such characters] never had existence except in the imagination of those who were as ignorant of the Irish people as they were of their language and feelings. Even Sheridan himself was forced to pander to this erroneous estimate

12 When the protagonist in *The Playboy of the Western World*, Christy, first appears on stage, he claims to have killed his father with a spade. The eloquence – taken as a typical Irish characteristic – with which he tells his story along with the inhabitants’ admiration for his bold, and within the family context extremely rare, action briefly make him something of a hero. However, when his father, who has miraculously survived his attack, enters the village tavern, Christy is suddenly seen as a coward and a liar by the villagers. Intending to regain the esteem he has lost in their eyes, Christy attacks his father for a second time; however, this attempt equally fails to meet its end. The final reconciliation with his father prevents Christy, the playboy from the Western World, from being hanged by the local inhabitants.
and distorted conception of our character; for, after all, Sir Lucius O’Trigge was his Irishman, but not Ireland’s Irishman. (i-ii, original emphasis)

Consequently, Carleton claims that his authorial purpose of publishing these stories is to remove “many absurd prejudices which have existed from time immemorial against his countrymen” (i). He strongly disagrees with the point of view that the words uttered by the Irish could not be called a language and argues that bilingualism as well as the transition of the people’s mother tongue from Irish to English might make the Irish look dull and ignorant. Carleton hints at the fact that the picture drawn of the Irish offers significant insight into the English psyche: the occupiers used their power to disparage the Irish peasants in order to justify their presence in the country. In the nineteenth century, however, Anglo-Irish writers began to publish – literally, to make public – the ‘true’ story of their people: “the intellect of the country was beginning to feel its strength, and put forth its power” (vii). This statement makes clear that Carleton primarily understood history as a question of power. Those who are in power also have the power to select and define facts, which in turn depend on one’s perspective. History, being recorded from someone’s point of view, can never be neutral. Consequently, all history is fictional to some degree. As there are always multiple views of events, ‘the’ public view is inevitably constituted by means of power. Although he recognised one of the crucial postmodern principles, Carleton did not grasp the full implications of his insight. In the twentieth century, Doctorow rightly argues that

[…] history as written by historians is clearly insufficient. And the historians are the first to express skepticism [sic] over this ‘objectivity’ of the discipline. A lot of people discovered after World War II and in the fifties that much of what was taken by the younger generations as history was highly interpreted history. […] And it turned out that there were not only individuals but whole peoples whom we had simply written out of our history – black people, Chinese people, Indians. (58–59)

Thus, despite offering an extensive analysis of how stereotyping functions, Carleton cannot avoid falling into the same trap; he promises the reader that his “exhibitions of Irish peasant life, in its most comprehensive sense, may be relied on as truthful and authentic” (viii). He further aims “to give a panorama of Irish life among the people – comprising at one view all the strong points of their general character – their loves, sorrows, superstitions, piety, amusements, crimes and virtues” (xxiv). Carleton’s stories free the Irish from many stereotypes. At the same time, however, he unconsciously creates new clichés and myths about them.13

13 Roland Barthes argues that “myth is a type of speech,” a “system of communication” conveying a particular message (Barthes 27, original emphasis). Talking about the function of myth-
As indicated above, Synge is another author who tried to present an authentic and realistic account of Irish life, and, therefore, put a strong emphasis on publicising his characters’ private lives. In the 1890s, Yeats urged Synge to visit the Aran Islands for inspiration and in order to “find a life that had never been expressed in literature” (“The Trembling of the Veil” 343). In his book *The Aran Islands*, Synge speaks of his encounter with the islanders and states that his aim is to describe what he “met with among them, inventing nothing and changing nothing that is essential” (xi). Still, the reader is not given a completely objective account. After all, the author has to make choices and despite his realistic report, Synge observes the islanders’ life from his position as an outsider. Having come to the islands as a foreigner, he is not familiar with the culture or the customs of the Aran Islands. When he first arrives, he speaks very little Irish and finds it difficult to communicate in the local inhabitants’ language. Synge includes those aspects in his narrative that strike him as amazing or unusual in order to introduce the reader to the hidden side of the isles. He offers a large number of examples of the islanders’ oral culture, belief in the supernatural and strong family bonds. Through his description of what the west of Ireland is ‘really’ like, Synge turns the secluded, private life of the Aran Islands into a pastoral tale or a myth:

> It is likely that much of the intelligence and charm of these people is due to the absence of any division of labour, and to the correspondingly wide development of each individual, whose varied knowledge and skill necessitates a considerable activity of mind. Each man can speak two languages. He is a skilled fisherman, and can manage a curagh with extraordinary nerve and dexterity. He can farm simply, burn kelp, cut out pampooties, mend nets, build and thatch a house, and make a cradle or a coffin. His work changes with the seasons in a way that keeps him free from the dullness that comes to people who have always the same occupation. The danger of his life on the sea gives him the alertness of the primitive hunter, and the long nights he spends fishing in his curagh bring him some of the emotions that are thought peculiar to men who have lived with the arts. (77)

This glorifying account of life on the Aran Islands illustrates Synge’s geographical orientation; England is no longer the definite centre, and the Irish mainland ceases to be the periphery. The Aran Islands, as part of the west of Ireland, represent that space which generations of Irish (Catholics) were forced to withdraw to under the force of the English colonisers, and which has been lost elsewhere: “I [i.e. Synge] became indescribably mournful, for I felt that this little corner on the face of the world, and the people who live in this,
have a peace and dignity from which we are shut for ever” (104). This space which was preserved on the Aran Islands, “[t]he whole spirit of the west of Ireland, with its strange wildness and reserve,” is now presented as the untouched true Ireland (69). In his narrative, the islands thus become the new periphery, the hidden other, where a language and culture that are distinct from the mainland’s can be explored. Moreover, the language and culture found on the Aran Islands, ironically enough, still show characteristic traits of the former – in other parts of the country long forgotten – Irish self.

However enthusiastic Synge’s account of life on the islands and however great his yearning for the loss of these qualities on the mainland, Kiberd rightly notes that there is an entirely different side to reality which Synge cannot suppress or hide: “In his writings, [Synge] worried constantly about the gap between a beautiful culture and the poverty that can underlie it” (Inventing Ireland 172). Amongst the locals, Synge therefore perceives a certain depression and desperation. Due to the harsh climate and the lack of work witnessed on the Aran Islands, young people leave the islands either to work on the mainland or to emigrate to the United States:

> The maternal feeling is so powerful on these islands that it gives a life of torment to the women. Their sons grow up to be banished as soon as they are of age, or to live here in continual danger on the sea; their daughters go away also, or are worn out in their youth with bearing children that grow up to harass them in their own turn a little later. (The Aran Islands 54)

Although Synge meticulously gathers the community’s manifold customs and habits in order to expose what he perceives as true Irishness, he cannot deny that his representation of the local public simultaneously is an Irishness on the verge of extinction.

Regardless of the fact that Synge is welcome in every house on the islands to gather folktales and pieces of history, the power to share their privateness lies entirely in the hands of the islanders. Aware of the tension between his readers’ interest in the unknown Gaelic culture and the islanders’ right to privacy, Synge has internalised the clash between public and private interests. As the author of The Aran Islands, he gathers as much information about the inhabitants as possible, but on a personal level he is careful not to abuse people’s confidence and friendship. For example, once Synge decides not to go to the wake of an old woman, fearing that his “presence might jar upon the mourners” (25). Nonetheless, even in situations in which he tries to stay away from the inhabitants or to take the position of a distant observer, he cannot avoid witnessing and to some extent participating in these people’s traditions and customs:
last evening I could hear the strokes of a hammer in the yard, where, in the
middle of a little crowd of idlers, the next of kin laboured slowly at the coffin. To-day,
before the hour for the funeral, poteen was served to a number of men who stood
about upon the road, and a portion was brought to me in my room. (25)

In that sense, private and public knowledge in Synge’s account mingle and are
characterised by smooth transitions. In fact, the book proves how thin the
demarcating line between public and private knowledge is. This is particularly
the case given that, no matter how familiar Synge becomes with the islanders’
culture, he remains a stranger until the end. Although he reaches a high
command of the Irish language over the four consecutive years that he visits
the Aran Islands and although the locals are always hospitable and eager to talk
to him, they never consider him a true member of their community:

There is hardly an hour I am with them that I do not feel the shock of some
inconceivable idea, and then again the shock of some vague emotion that is familiar to
them and to me. On some days I feel this island as a perfect home and resting place; on
other days I feel I am a waif among the people. I can feel more with them than they can
feel with me, and while I wander among them, they like me sometimes, and laugh at
me sometimes, yet never know what I am doing. (58–59)

The local inhabitants, shaped by the harsh conditions of life on the islands,
ever come to fully understand Synge’s way of life. Synge mentions the three
questions these people are most interested in: “[…] whether I am a rich man,
whether I am married, and whether I have ever seen a poorer place than these
islands” (85). The islanders’ pragmatic and unromantic concepts of love and
marriage are indeed one of the major differences between Synge and the local
inhabitants. Every year, they suggest that he should marry. After all, “a man
who is not married is no better than an old jackass. He goes into his sister’s
house, and into his brother’s house; he eats a bit in this place and a bit in
another place, but he has no home for himself; like an old jackass straying on
the rocks” (65). Although Synge is accepted on the Aran Islands, the quote
gives insight into the islanders’ strong sense of belonging and their strict rules.
No one is supposed to share other people’s private space. In this community, a
home and a family of one’s own are a must. Family bonds, community, a close
relationship to nature and a deep belief in the supernatural are thus elements
seen to represent the people on the Aran Islands.

However, Synge’s decision to keep the power of sharing privateness in the
hands of the local community also means that what is presented in The Aran
Islands as their private world is only part of the picture. Some themes or
traumatising experiences are only hinted at vaguely, but never discussed in
detail in the text. Two possible explanations may be found for this phenom-
emon. On the one hand, certain issues might be regarded by the local
inhabitants as too personal or painful to be shared with someone who is neither a member of the family nor the community. From this point of view, the islanders’ reticence to move beyond a particular point of privateness would be responsible for the void or lack of public knowledge. On the other hand, however, the islanders’ silence could also result from the more profound unease or inability to articulate the most disturbing or distressing aspects of their lives in general. This interpretation is further enforced by other painful episodes in Irish history which have hardly ever been voiced in literary texts.

In fact, the tendency of leaving aside certain disturbing themes and aspects of Irish life is perfectly characteristic of nineteenth century Anglo-Irish literature. I fully agree with Kinsella, who argues that quite amazingly “[s]ilence, on the whole, is the real condition of Irish literature in the nineteenth century” (810). Even in the texts of writers – such as Carleton and Synge – who strove to paint a realistic picture of Ireland, the two most devastating developments for the Irish in the nineteenth century, namely the famines of the 1840s and the subsequent massive emigration, do not feature. Although largely ignored in literature, “the single most important event in Ireland in the modern period,” the Great Famine, actually “marked a watershed in many areas of Irish life – demographics, economics, society and culture” (Whelan 137). In a population of roughly eight million, close to one million Irish people died of hunger and up to two million people emigrated, nearly reducing the population by half within a few decades (Daly 732). According to Kinealy, “[o]ne of the disturbing features of the Great Hunger is that despite the fact that it occurred so late in European

14 Carleton’s novel *The Black Prophet: A Tale of Irish Famine* (which was first published in *The Dublin University Magazine* in 1846) describes the devastating effects that the famine between 1817 and 1822 had already had on the country. In this novel, the narrator compares Ireland to a “vast lazaret-house [that is, a leper house] filled with famine, disease, and death” and he suggests that “[t]he very skies of heaven were hung with the black drapery of the grave, for never since, nor within the memory of man before it, did the clouds present shapes of such gloomy and funeral import. Hearses, coffins, long funeral processions, and all the dark emblems of mortality were reflected, as it were, on the sky, from the terrible works of pestilence and famine which were going forward on the earth beneath it. [...] To any person passing through the country such a combination of startling and awful appearances was presented as has probably never been witnessed since. Go where you might, every object reminded you of the fearful desolation that was progressing around you. The features of the people were gaunt, their eyes wild and hollow, and their gait feeble and tottering. Pass through the fields, and you were met by little groups bearing their home on their shoulders, and that with difficulty, a coffin or two of them” (125). The narrator’s deeply cynical comment that such misery has never been witnessed since, however, indicates that misery of the famine experienced in the 1840s is beyond description. In fact, in his preface to the novel, Carleton claims that “the strongest imagery of Fiction is frequently transcended by the terrible realities of Truth” (124 – 125).
history, and was so fully documented and chronicled, so many silences have remained” (“The Famine Killed Everything” 34). In other words, although a reasonable number of historical documents do in fact exist and although “[t]he Famine […] helped to shape the identity of Irish people and that of their descendants throughout the world,” people’s suffering remained mostly “hidden, unexplored, and unknown” for decades (2). Eagleton interprets this “muteness,” which became endemic not only of the actual victims but of later Irish generations as well, as a sign of such a devastating and traumatising event that it “strains at the limits of the articulable, and is truly in this sense the Irish Auschwitz” (13). Killen, a historian, believed that “anger, hatred, fear and compassion have mixed with shame to produce a reluctance, possibly an inability, to address the enormity of the national tragedy” (as quoted by Kinealy, “The Famine Killed Everything” 18). Inarticulateness, a colonial trauma as well as survivors’ guilt are, therefore, three reasons that have been put forward to explain why the Irish failed to tell this “tale of unimaginable suffering” for so long (Peck 145). O’Connor’s reading of “malignant shame” stresses in Kinealy’s eyes “the shame and the feeling of guilt experienced by the survivors” which was “carried on from generation to generation” and was present at an “individual, cultural or community level” (as quoted by Kinealy, “The Famine Killed Everything” 14). Tóibín, on the other hand, wonders whether the problem “may lie in the relationship between the catastrophe and analytic narrative” (9). “How do you write about the Famine? What tone do you use?” are two questions which he raises to indicate that there appears to have been some unspoken consensus for generations that the Famine is either a subject which is too personal or intimate to be published or that there is simply no language available for such disturbing feelings (9). After all, in the nineteenth century, “psychology was in its infancy […]. Thus, there was no language or structural method for understanding the psychological impact of this tragedy across generational time” (Peck 143). Unable to articulate their agony or shame, the victims and their ancestors are said to have remained in a state of immobilisation – a typical response to trauma – for generations (152). Thus, the overwhelming majority of writers hesitated to address this desolation and misery in their literary texts; only in a very small number of minor and mostly disregarded works are the Irish famines and their consequences

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15 Peck further explains that “[f]amines create a situation of deep moral ambivalence in which it appears as if it is within everyone’s power to at least share their food. It is easy for famine survivors, in desperate circumstances, to translate this simple fact into an irrational self-statement or belief that reads something like, ‘I wouldn’t have survived without eating and yet my eating ensured the deaths of those who did not get the food I ate.’ In cognitive behavioral terms, this is called a cognitive distortion. The simple act of eating can turn people’s sense of self into that of a [sic] having been complicit in a mass murder that they did not initiate” (159).
actually explored. Therefore, a certain void concerning the private knowledge and experiences of these events has remained, which not even the wave of historical publications, released between 1995 and 1997 following the Famine commemorations, have managed to fully compensate for.

The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writings contains some of the rare exceptions, namely Peadar Ó Laoghaire’s autobiographical account of this period in “Mo Sgéal Féin (My Own Story),” Asenath Nicholson’s excerpts from her book “Lights and Shades of Ireland” and William Steuart Trench’s description as a land agent in “Realities of Irish Life” (Vol. II, 129–157). Since the 1960s, several Anglo-Irish writers, such as Tom Murphy in Famine (published in 1968), Tom MacIntyre in The Great Hunger (1983) and Brian Friel in Translations, have begun to address the various “causes, impact and consequences of the Great Famine” (Day 213). However, as O’Toole has pointed out, despite the fact that some texts are actually set in the 1840s, most texts are “much more concerned with the contemporary world, with the spiritual and emotional famine of their own times” (as quoted by Tóibín 28).

In 1979, Liam O’Flaherty published his novel Famine offering a “panoramic portrayal of the Great Famine” by displaying in a realistic style how three generations of the Kilmartin family, who are deeply “rooted in a place and time which contains and defines them,” were inflicted by the potato blight and the subsequent onset of the plague (Sheeran 216 and 217). The novel does not only voice the angst and the horrors experienced by the starving population in a meticulous manner, but it also juxtaposes the peasants’ mutual help in their attempt to fight the inevitable with the cruel exploitation of the landlords and the injustices carried out by the oppressive – and at times colonial – forces within the community. Those in power – the English ascendancy as well as the rising local middle class who had begun to trade with the colonisers – in this novel are not only shown to let down the native population at their time of misery but also to actively have aggravated their suffering. The foreign colonisers are, for instance, represented by Captain Chadwick, who, according to Sheeran, “ranks highest in the scale of perfidy” as his relationship to the native population could be described as one “of torturer to victim, more brutalized himself by the violence he inflicts on those on whom he inflicts it” (225).

Ever since the Irish Famine, the political assessment of this period in Irish history has provoked a fierce controversy over the British position as well as over Irish food exports to the United Kingdom. John Mitchel, one of the leading political writers in the nineteenth century, coined the famous phrase “[t]he Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine” (219). Although the famine was initially caused by the failure of the potato crop, the Irish “felt betrayed by their colonial rulers” (Woodham-Smith as quoted by Peck 156). As a result of the Act of Union in 1801, Ireland was governed from Westminster during the Famine. “[A] United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland had been created but, as the Famine demonstrated, the political union was far from being united” (Kinealy, The Great Irish Famine 18). The prevailing ideology in England towards Ireland could be described as a “policy of non-intervention” which “coincided with the dominant philosophical orthodoxy that no man should depend on another” (19). This British stance aroused the strong feeling amongst the local population that the English could have alleviated the Irish people’s distress and misery if they had wanted to. In actual fact, Kinealy argues that most historians agree that this tragedy “was neither inevitable nor unavoidable” (This Great Calamity xv). As early as the 1860s, John Mitchel, amongst others, accused the British government not only of indifference to Irish misery but also of actively pursuing a genocidal policy. In the introductory comment on John Mitchel’s essays in The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Deane emphasises that “Mitchel’s belief that the British government used the Famine as an
As this case illustrates, misrepresentation as well as lack of intimate truth and knowledge cannot always be explained with power structures and the colonisers’ attempt to repress pieces of truth that are different from their own perspective. In various cases in this chapter, it has been suggested that the Anglo-Irish writers published their private experiences and voiced their own points of view to oppose the dominant discourse of the colonisers, who defined public truth due to their position in and view of society. In this particular instance, however, a new explanation emerges: this time, the void is not caused by the colonisers who wish to silence alternative versions of truth but by the Irish themselves. Inarticulateness with regard to the Great Famine and the subsequent mass emigration of their own people shows that, whether consciously or unconsciously, (private) knowledge is withheld by the survivors themselves: in this case, no authentic or realistic account of the events is provided. The emotions involved in these painful experiences might have proved to be too overwhelming or thoroughly undesirable. Or, on a more general level, the writers may have felt that language failed them with regard to the Great Famine.

Despite the inarticulateness surrounding the specific historical incidents of the Famine and the subsequent mass emigration, the otherwise long tradition of offering a realistic account of Irish life was continued at the beginning of the twentieth century by Sean O’Casey. As the plots of O’Casey’s plays are fictional, they naturally differ considerably from Synge’s approach and aims. However, realism in O’Casey is evoked by people’s accents and dialects: their slang and the imitation of Gaelic structures in the English language intensify the feeling of Irishness. On the other hand, people’s harsh living conditions are examined carefully. Focusing “not on the deeds of warriors, but on the pangs of the poor,” O’Casey’s plays spell out the devastating effects which poverty, misery and war had on working-class Dublin (Kiberd, Inventing Ireland 218). A sombre and dark picture of Irish slum life is painted, including scenes of violence and alcoholism. Massive social deprivation along with ground-breaking political changes resulting in utter “chassis,” that is chaos, are shown to be the main worries the slum-dwellers in the capital were faced with at the time (Juno and the Paycock 21).

The historical developments in Ireland between 1916 and the establishment of the Free State in 1922 form the background of O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy. The Shadow of the Gunman (1923) illustrates the effect which the War of Independence had on people. In Juno and the Paycock (1924) personal betrayal is set against lost hopes in the Irish Civil War, and The Plough and the Stars instrument of genocide became an integral part of the Irish nationalist crusade against British rule” (176).
(1926), finally, encompasses the personal consequences that the Easter Rising in 1916 had on the Irish. Combining social and political issues, O’Casey’s plays are therefore characterised by an entanglement of the private with the public realm. Murray’s analysis of public and private space in O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy serves as an excellent starting point for my own study:

Each play juxtaposes two worlds, the private and the public. The private is the life of the tenement dwellers, where indeed privacy is hardly to be thought of: and yet the families who encroach freely on each other’s space are preoccupied with personal and domestic problems. The public life in O’Casey’s plays inevitably means the political: he shows how the affairs of state and the ambitions of freedom hold the lives of ordinary people in a vice. There is no escape from the battles raging in the streets. There is no hiding place from the consequences of a movement dedicated to overthrowing the oppressor. […] Compassion takes precedence over political allegiance or ideology; each of the three Dublin plays is called a ‘tragedy.’ The laws of tragedy insist that pity and terror rather than political ideas should be primary. O’Casey’s great achievement was to rise above local allegiances and turn the harsh conditions of working-class life into the materials of modern art. (Sean O’Casey 17)

While I fully agree with Murray’s interpretation, it would be beneficial, both for a deeper understanding of O’Casey’s texts as well as for the subsequent discussion of Friel’s plays, to distinguish between different shades of private and public realms in O’Casey. In fact, traditional boundaries between these two spheres are constantly blurred. The atmosphere among the people who live squeezed into these tenements resembles that in a station concourse where people enter and leave just as they please:

[Ol]ver two-thirds of the tenement-dwellers lived in a single room. On average, over fifty people lived in each tenement. Such a setting dictated the controlling mood of the Dublin plays, each of which is a study in claustrophobia, in the helpless availability of persons, denied any right to privacy and doomed to live in one another’s pockets. (Kiberd, Inventing Ireland 219)

The rooms, in which the plays are set and where the people are generally deprived of privacy, can be regarded as semi-public spaces, comparable to Habermas’ public sphere in the political realm. As indicated above, this sphere was established within the private realm in the eighteenth century according to Habermas. O’Casey’s characters basically have to accept a certain lack of intimacy and privacy in environments where they witness whatever is happening in other people’s lives and partake in their joys and broken dreams.

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18 The diagram Habermas proposed to graphically outline the public and the private spheres in the eighteenth century can be found in Chapter II (p. 15).
Nevertheless, this proximity among the community members is not translated into true intimacy or confidential discourse. On the contrary, there is little agreement between the neighbours. Living in the same tenement by accident, they may well participate in each other’s privateness, but are only loosely related apart from that. Jealousy, distrust, unease, and most importantly, different political convictions, are much more common than empathy, kindness or even friendship.

As pointed out by Murray, the private sphere in O’Casey is not just undermined by the inhabitants of the tenement, but is repeatedly invaded by the actual public sphere, by the political developments occurring in the streets of Dublin. In each of the three plays, O’Casey chose to include large windows in his stage settings. Initially, these symbolise the transition between the private and the public sphere, but they come to represent the blur between the boundaries: noises enter from the outside on many occasions and figures can at various points of the plays be seen passing in the streets. From a metaphorical point of view, different rumours or pieces of news concerning recent political developments enter from the outside world and mingle with the private realm. Occasionally, the boundaries even collapse when public figures, promulgating their political views directly, invade the private space and world of O’Casey’s characters and suggest that the political bears the right to overrule the individual, the private sphere. In this final step, the private space is thus literally overrun by the public realm: both the freedom fighters and the British soldiers, representing politics or the state, truly transfer the political turmoil into the private space and world of the Dublin slum-dwellers.

In O’Casey, the private realm is thus characterised by different degrees of public invasion depending on whether it is the neighbouring community or political events which intrude on the individual, domestic sphere. The private realm as defined in traditional terms will at a later stage of my study be shown to have been reduced to a space of sickness and death. These various invasions of their private space ultimately politicise the inhabitants; it is impossible for the characters to avoid politics in O’Casey’s Dublin plays. Each of them has to take a stand one way or the other. This attitude of the powerful forces in the state who value the political sphere over the domestic one is criticised long before military actions from the streets are transferred into the tenements. The political instability in the country has negative consequences on O’Casey’s families: his characters mostly live in dysfunctional families. Just as O’Casey’s communities are the opposites of closely-knit groups, Chothia claims that families are far from united since “[w]hatever refuge the family offers, it is full of discord, opposing interests and misunderstandings” (128). For example, the main character in Juno and the Paycock, Captain Jack Boyle, does indeed complain about his children’s lack of respect towards him and his
having to live in a society where human beings are not deeply embedded in families:

BOYLE. Chiselurs [i.e. children] don’t care a damn now about their parents, they’re bringin’ their fathers’ grey hairs down with a sorra to the grave, and laughin’ at it, laughin’ at it. Ah is suppose it’s just the same everywhere – the whole world’s in a state o’ chassis! (21)

In actual fact, McDonald argues that “families and communities [in O’Casey are] destroyed by political violence” in the Dublin trilogy, as the differing values, attitudes and political convictions within the families are without exception drowned in the blood of some family or community member (“Dublin Trilogy” 136).

Although the pre-eminence of the public – political – sphere over the private or domestic realm was strongly emphasised in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century, O’Casey’s Dublin plays make the playwright’s own unease over this tendency perfectly evident. He disapproves of the political ambitions proclaimed by the group currently in power of the public sphere. He further disagrees with these people who consequently deny the right of private sphere and demand complete submission of any individual goals and ambitions to the Irish people’s political ends. Personally favouring the domestic sphere over the public in his plays, O’Casey claims that, quite regardless of the political difficulties at this stage in Irish history, people’s immense social worries rather than the political situation found in Ireland should really be under scrutiny. Hence, McDonald notes that

O’Casey debunks the mythology of Mother Ireland, who sends her sons out to die for the recovery of her four green fields, replacing it with the images of real suffering mothers, and families torn apart by men drunk on ineffable dreams of political utopia and doggedly sober on a doctrine of arid, inflexible political principles. (“Dublin Trilogy” 137)

McDonald believes that “[f]or O’Casey, like Brecht, the horror of human suffering is based primarily in its avoidability […]” (Tragedy 87). O’Casey’s Dublin plays show politics in the emerging Irish state to be a destructive force where families erroneously sacrifice their sons to the country for their heroic ideals. Heroic deeds carried out in the mistaken interest of the Irish public are deconstructed in O’Casey. They fail and more than anything cause discord among families and community members: “[...] the Dublin trilogy teaches us to avoid the dangers of political idealism through a demonstration of the terrible destruction these ideals cause to family life, to the hearth and home humanity represented by the women” (McDonald, Tragedy 36). Men are indeed portrayed as cowards, unemployed or lazy fighters who enter battle for
their ideals or have died for them, whereas a number of women embody O’Casey’s insight that “one drop of human kindness is worth more than the deepest draughts of the red wine of idealism” (as quoted by McDonald, “Dublin Trilogy” 137). In *Juno and the Paycock*, Juno Boyle, one of O’Casey’s strong female figures, neither supports nor believes in the attitudes of her children. Johnny as a former freedom fighter and Mary as a member of a Trade Union are two representatives of the Irish who fight for their principles in the streets. Their mother, however, has chosen a much more pragmatic approach to life:

MARY. It doesn’t matter what you say, ma – a principle’s a principle.
MRS BOYLE. Yis, an’ when I go into oul’ Murphy’s tomorrow, an’ he gets to know that, instead o’ payin’ all, I’m goin’ to borrow more, what’ll he say when I tell him a principle’s a principle? What’ll we do if he refuses to give us any more on tick? (8)

In spite of nursing her son in a loving way, Mrs Boyle is completely disillusioned by the result of his commitment to Ireland: Johnny’s hip was hit by a bullet during Easter Week and a bomb shattered his arm and, in her own words, “put the finishin’ touch on him” (9). When Mary is dismissed as soon as her father discovers that she is pregnant with an illegitimate child, Juno’s parental feeling for her daughter lets her take a far-reaching decision:

MRS BOYLE. We’ll go. Come, Mary, an’ we’ll never come back here again. Let your father furrage for himself now; I’ve done all I could an’ it was all no use – he’ll be hopeless till the end of his days. I’ve got a little room in me sister’s where we’ll stop till your trouble is over, an’ then we’ll work together for the sake of the baby.
MARY. My poor child that’ll have no father!
MRS BOYLE. It’ll have what’s far better – it’ll have two mothers. (83–84)

Contrary to Juno’s courageous resolution to help her daughter, none of the so-called heroic political actions O’Casey’s male characters undertake improve the social situation for the individuals or the families in the tenements. Most characters are shown to adhere to mere ideals and fixed political concepts which fail to address the serious social situation. In fact, their attitudes display a

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19 Asked to attend a political meeting and being reminded of his former oath, Johnny refers to his state of health by claiming: “I won’t go! Haven’t I done enough for Ireland! I’ve lost me arm, and me hip’s destroyed so that I’ll never be able to walk right again! Good God, haven’t I done enough for Ireland?” (59) The young interlocutor’s reaction to Johnny’s statement is one of the many examples in O’Casey’s plays which underlines that political extremists take their military operation extremely seriously: “Boyle, no man can do enough for Ireland!” (59) Hence, it is primarily this favouring of nationalism over socialism which O’Casey strongly disapproved of.
gross lack of humanity combined with political aspirations aiming too high to enhance people’s lives. Unlike Yeats, who gave tribute to the rebels of the Rising in his poem “Easter 1916,”

O’Casey despises such heroics as boyscoutish vanity and he mocks the obsession with swords and uniforms as the decadent vanity of self-deceiving men. While Yeats lists the names of the warrior dead, O’Casey worries about the nameless civilian casualties. Where Yeats salutes the heroism of the rebels – while, of course, questioning the necessity – O’Casey goes farther and questions the whole idea of a hero. (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 224)

In O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy, heroism and heroic deeds are seen to cause misery rather than to enhance a character’s happiness. The various political deaths prove to be utterly senseless and indeed present the world in a state of complete ‘chassis’ where people’s values are turned upside down. Ironically enough, a sense of belonging and community can be glimpsed in O’Casey when the private realm is invaded and completely destroyed by the public sphere and when acute suffering occurs. Characters who are terminally ill or in a state of dying, such as Johnny in *Juno and the Paycock* and Nora in *The Plough and the Stars*, are suddenly granted privacy, and in fact, some private space of their own. After the birth of her stillborn child, Nora suffers a mental breakdown. Her behaviour henceforth strongly reminds the reader of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* when Ophelia staggers across the stage, mumbling in madness and despair. All of a sudden, the inhabitants of the tenement sympathise with Nora, whose state of health has deteriorated, and they share her pain and desperation. For the first time, they function as a caring community treating Nora like their sick relative. For example, Bessie Burgess, having been introduced in the first two acts as a fervent Protestant loyalist opposed to any political action taken by the Irish Catholics, puts Nora back to bed in a truly private room of her own (off-stage) whenever she re-appears on stage. Stumbling across the stage, Nora is looking for her stillborn child, whom they have taken away from her. Moreover, she is awaiting the return of her husband, who is fighting for the Irish cause in the Easter Rising and is eventually killed. As “the rebellion is the enemy of family life,” Nora’s miscarriage parallels the failed political enterprise of the Irish rebels (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* 236). In Yeats’ words, “[a] terrible beauty” was born by the Easter Rising, causing primarily pain and misery to the direct relatives of the fighters rather than producing heroes in their eyes (*Yeats’s Poems* 287, l.16, l.40 and l.80). Empathising with Nora – much to her family and friends’ surprise – Bessie Burgess becomes one of the most fascinating and changeable characters in the course of the play. In the end, however, by presenting her in an unfavourable light, O’Casey does not make her a heroic figure. In fact, this
sudden turn signals his deep discomfort with the concept of heroism. When Nora runs towards the window to look for her husband, Bessie tries to pull her back from this acute zone of danger. Failing to do so in time, Bessie herself is hit by a bullet. Her body language and her exclamation do not only underline the shock but also the ambivalence of her feelings towards Nora and the Irish:

*With a great effort Bessie pushes Nora away from the window, the force used causing her to stagger against it herself. Two rifle shots ring out in quick succession. Bessie jerks her body convulsively; stands stiffly for a moment, a look of agonised astonishment on her face, then she staggers forward, leaning heavily on the table with her hands.*

**BESSIE.** *(With an arrested scream of fear and pain)* Merciful God, I’m shot, I’m shot, I’m shot! Th’ life’s pourin’ out o’ me! *(To Nora)* I’ve got this through … through you … through you, you bitch you! … O God, have mercy on me! *(To Nora)* You wouldn’t stop quiet, no, you wouldn’t, you wouldn’t, blast you! Look at what I’m after getting’, look at what I’m after getting’ … I’m bleedin’ to death, an’ no one’s here to stop th’ flowin’ blood!

[…]

**BESSIE.** *(moaningly)* This is what’s after comin’ on me for nursin’ you day an’ night … I was a fool, a fool, a fool! Get me a drinck o’ wather, you jade, will you? There’s a fire burnin’ in me blood! *(The Plough and the Stars 157–158)*

The sense of tragedy is increased by Nora, who is too frightened and mentally confused to act appropriately and even fails to hold Bessie’s hand when asked to do so. She simply stands there watching Bessie Burgess die and waiting for Mrs Gogan, another neighbour, to cover her. Mrs Gogan’s comment, “My God, she’s as cold as death. They’re after murtherin’ th’ poor inoffensive woman,” is very much along O’Casey’s line of disregarding war and rebellion in general (159). In the final scene of the play, this point of view is made even more explicit: just after the two soldiers have killed Bessie Burgess by accident, they are introduced as having no ethics or morals whatsoever. As they enter the room where the dead victim is lying on the floor, they are shocked for a short moment when they realise that they have just killed an innocent civilian. Then they sit down casually beside the dead body to enjoy breakfast:

**CORPORAL STODDART.** *(who has been looking around, to Sergeant Tinley)* Tea here, Sergeant. Wot abaht a cup of scald?

**SERGEANT TINLEY.** Pour it aht, Stoddart, pour it aht. I could scoff hanything just now. *(160)*

These two soldiers, representatives of those in favour of ‘heroic’ deeds for nationalist goals, clearly indicate that, in O’Casey’s view, radical social changes and the establishment of true ethic values should have preceded political
movements in Ireland. In the Dublin trilogy, freedom fighters and soldiers invariably fail to act as responsible characters and thus to serve as new, inspiring images of the Irish population. With regard to their ambitious aims for the good of the country, the character traits outlined in these figures are shown to be rather unflattering.

Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* and Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood*, two particularly successful examples of Anglo-Irish autobiographical texts, published in the 1990s, evoke an equally grim and unappealing image of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century. In each of these two novels, the narrator offers a personal account of his childhood in order to underline that his private truth does not match the public point of view. In fact, certain aspects of the narrators’ private truths and realities are just as ugly and unbecoming as the two soldiers’ behaviour described in O’Casey’s play *The Plough and the Stars*. As in O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy, intimacy and trust between the different characters are difficult concepts in the families described in Deane’s and McCourt’s texts. In her study *Anglo-Irish Autobiography: Class, Gender and the Forms of Narrative*, Grubgeld stresses that “from James Joyce to Edna O’Brien and Frank McCourt, childhood is a terror-ridden period of repression, guilt and disillusionment” (20). Thus, Anglo-Irish autobiographical accounts are full of dysfunctional families and “Gothic motifs to express the sense of being haunted by ancestral guilt and family secrets” (86).

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20 Seamus Deane won the 1996 Guardian Fiction Prize, the Irish Times International Fiction Prize 1997, as well as the Irish Literature Prize 1997 for his autobiography *Reading in the Dark*, while Frank McCourt was awarded the 1997 Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics’ Circle Award and the Los Angeles Times Award for the description of his childhood in *Angela’s Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood*.

In *Selected Twentieth Century Anglo-Irish Autobiographies: Theory and Patterns of Self-Representations*, Wally defines memoirs as pivoting “around the subject’s outer career, thus showing it in the accomplishment of social roles,” while “autobiographies focus on the subject’s inner life” documenting “[t]he protagonist’s inner conflict, anguish and anxiety, his or her attempt to find and establish an identity” (33). Typically, in autobiographies “the outer environment features only in so far as it is connected to the I’s development” (33, original emphasis). Nevertheless, with regard to the special situation in Ireland, Kenneally indicates that “most of the great twentieth century literary self-portraits overlap in their reference to major political and social changes which occurred in Ireland during the 1890s to 1920s” (111). “Owing to the highly politicised environment in which Anglo-Irish autobiographies were produced” and recognising that “[a]t the heart of many Anglo-Irish self-accounts lies the attempt to integrate the traumatic establishment of the Irish Free State (and all that it entailed) into the subject’s life,” Wally agrees that in the Irish context a distinction between memoirs and autobiography seems “pointless” (34). Thus, due to the complex entanglement of politics and private life, I will follow Kenneally and Wally’s argument and use the term *autobiography* to refer to Deane’s and McCourt’s texts.
Therefore, contrary to O’Casey’s plays where the Irish society represented by the slum-dwellers of a tenement is portrayed and criticised, the focal point in these narratives is on the narrators’ domestic space. *Home* and *family* as well as the fabrication of identity through the writing process, therefore, play a major role. Obviously, in autobiographies, the main purpose is not to discuss the power structures within society or their impact on the narrator’s private life but to reconsider or reconstruct one’s childhood by means of language in order to “explain the self to the self” (Kenneally 113). “Self-explanation, self-justification, self-disclosure and self-expressions” are, therefore, identified as some of the main aims of an auto-biographer when constructing and interpreting versions of one’s former *self* (119). Nevertheless, in his article on “Autobiography and Memoirs 1890–1988,” Deane explains that

> [a]utobiography is not just concerned with the self; it is also concerned with the ‘other,’ the person or persons, events or places, that have helped to give the self definition. […] [A]uthors […] are seeking, through personal experience, self-examination, reconsideration of historical events and circumstances, to identify the other force, the hostile or liberating energy, which made the self come into consciousness and thereby give to existence a pattern or the beginnings of a pattern of explanation. (380)

Drawing attention to the crucial role of language in shaping or inventing reality, Wally, quite generally, argues that “[a]utobiography is a construct of a construct in the sense that the narrative is as much constructed as its point of origin, the individual” (29). Hughes refers to the same phenomenon when she quotes Marcus saying that “[t]he ‘I’ that appears in the autobiographical text […] is both pre-existent and constructed” (13). Thus, it has to be stressed that there is a strong fictional and in many cases even meta-fictional element in autobiographical texts. To some extent, the actual text creates reality, and by publishing his own story, the narrator is finally enabled “to break down the barriers of personal isolation, to liberate [himself] from the restrictive silences of self-consciousness” (Kenneally 119). By being able to articulate what remained silent in his real past, the narrator is given the opportunity to express himself and oppose dominant discourse as well as public truth.

The first-person narrator in *Reading in the Dark* offers a lyrical description of his family history in the north of Ireland, which differs considerably from what is regarded as the official and public truth. However, as the narrator shares the knowledge of the ‘complete truth’ about his family history only with his mother and late grandfather, more than one truth exists within the community as well as within the family. Each member of the household acts and suffers depending on how much he or she knows about the shame and agony brought on the family by a “long, silent feud” (*Reading* 43). This
The phenomenon of being more or less informed of the events in the family history could be described as a special instance of discrepant awareness. Intrigued by the story surrounding his family from an early age, the narrator slowly comes to unveil the disastrous secret. He soon senses that the ‘true’ story of the feud circles around the disturbing fact that “[his] mother’s father had [his] father’s brother killed” (187). In 1922, the narrator’s grandfather believes that Eddie, a young man vaguely linked to the IRA like himself, has betrayed the Catholic minority to the police. Unknown to any member of his family, he orders Eddie’s execution. However, the grandfather is mistaken. His daughter, the narrator’s mother, knows that the real informer is her boyfriend Tony McIlhenny. When Tony leaves her in 1926 to marry her own sister Kate, the narrator’s mother takes revenge on her former boyfriend and reveals his true identity to her father. Upon realising his mistake, the grandfather forces Tony to flee the country and thus to abandon his pregnant wife Kate. Entirely unaware of the unholy connection between the two families, the narrator’s mother, on the other hand, eventually marries Eddie’s brother. On his deathbed, the grandfather, ashamed of the mistake he made years ago, confesses the truth to his daughter. As a result of the disturbing news, the narrator’s mother suffers a physical and mental breakdown. She completely withdraws from the family, exemplifying an extreme form of Sofsky’s claim that the wall “provides distance and protects against attacks” (23). Perceiving her own family as hostile or hazardous, her mind becomes a private space to which no one else has access. She no longer participates in family life and stops sharing privacy with anyone. Although she partially recovers after a year, the piece of private truth that her father unveiled to her before he died remains such a blow that it leaves her haunted for the rest of her life.21

21 In his chapter “Big Mistakes in Small Places: Exterior and Interior Space in Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark” in Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination, Smyth offers an outstanding reading of the “complex set of spatial coordinates” in Deane’s text (136). Using Bachelard’s The Poetics of Space and Heidegger’s philosophical thoughts on homelessness and alienation as a starting point for his textual analysis of Deane’s autobiographical account, the author closely examines the implications which the general setting Derry has, spells out his “historical and political associations” with the hillfort Grianán of Aileach, comments on the symbolic value of borders and bridges in the text and finally focuses on the house as intimate human space (140). He calls the image of the window “particularly revealing” because it “offers a suitable space for a ghostly presence caught between past and present, between openness and closure,” and he concludes that, indeed, “the narrator of Reading in the Dark finds himself increasingly caught between discourses of openness and closure, interiority and exteriority” (156). Indicating that “a complex geography of ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ appears to be deeply embedded in the human psyche,” Smyth rightly points out that “Reading in the Dark rehearses this geography at a number of levels, and [that] part of its impact as a narrative lies in its own exquisite blend of the fears and desires associated with these imaginative locations” (157).
Having observed how his mother hurriedly leaves his grandfather’s house after her father has shared his secret with her, the narrator gradually finds the missing clues in the story and manages to grasp the different shades of the “convoluted family saga” (Smyth 134). When the narrator indicates to his mother that he has come to understand the details of his family history and now shares this secret with her, his mother is terrified; she fails to realise that the knowledge her son has gained is too painful for him to share even with the other members of the family. Instead of having a uniting effect and creating a strong bond between the two family members, this private knowledge separates mother and son, underlining that at times “[t]he history of private life is also a history of various kinds of fear” (Prost 173). In addition to being afflicted with shame and grief, the narrator’s mother fears that the truth of her secret might be revealed both publicly and within the family. Tormented by her son’s knowledge, she turns vividly against him, treats him in a “hostile” manner and keeps up “a low-intensity warfare” towards him (Reading 215). Having been asked about her birthday wish, she admits that his presence prevents her from finally burying the past. As a sign of her desperation, she begs him to leave the house for good:

‘Just for that day,’ she answered, ‘just for that one day, the seventeenth of May, to forget everything. Or at least not to be reminded of it. Can you give me that?’

I didn’t reply.

‘Why don’t you go away?’ she asked me. ‘Then maybe I could look after your father properly for once, without your eyes on me.’

I told her I would. I’d go away, after university. That would be her birthday gift, that promise. She nodded. I moved away just as she put out her hand towards me. (224)

This scene once more highlights how shared private knowledge need not necessarily increase the sense of intimacy between people. The mother would have much preferred her son not to know her secret in order to keep the power to share this knowledge in her own hands. The narrator’s longing to know the secret and his mother’s utter distress and anguish as he succeeds illustrate Vincent’s conviction that “[t]he idea of secrecy is intolerable to the person excluded. But a secret may also be intolerable to the one who possesses it” (163–164). The first-person narrator also pays a heavy price for gaining insight into the family history as a result of witnessing how his mother left the house after his grandfather had talked to her before his death: “I left him [i.e. the grandfather] and went straight home, home, where I could never talk to my father or my mother properly again” (Reading 126). After all, “knowing what I did separated me from them both” (187).

The book claims that what the public alleges to be the truth is only the official version of what happened and should mainly be seen as a manifestation
of power by the dominant (Protestant) forces in town. However, this account has little in common with reality and the private truths of those characters who were directly involved in the events. As long as the narrator remains silent, some people in town believe that his uncle Eddie was a member of the IRA and that he left for the States, while others are convinced that he was shot by the police once it had become publicly known that he was an informer. The truth, however, which is kept silent by the narrator, his mother and his grandfather, remains sealed and therefore non-existent. Before he succeeds in breaking the heavy silence surrounding the feud, the narrator is possessed by the idea of knowing what happened and he longs for the father to break his silence to voice his personal view of what he thinks happened to Eddie. He learns that “[so] broken was my father’s family that it felt to me like a catastrophe you could live with only if you kept it quiet, let it die down of its own accord like a dangerous fire” (42–43). Unlike his mother and father, who for different reasons each seem “paralysed by shame,” the first-person narrator cannot bear the silence (223). On the one hand, he feels a strong urge to articulate and disclose the truth; on the other hand, however, it does not feel right to inform the other members of the family against his mother’s will.

His final solution to the dilemma directly links him to the people described in The Poems of the Dispossessed. The narrator withdraws to a space which he knows his father does not have access to. He translates everything he knows about this “curse a family can never shake off” into Irish and burns the original English version as soon as he has finished his translation (Reading 66). Then, one evening, pretending to do his homework, the narrator reads the entire family saga to his father who is no longer fluent in Irish:

*It was an essay we had been assigned in school, I told him, on local history. He just nodded and smiled and said it sounded wonderful. My mother had listened carefully. I knew she knew what I was doing. My father tapped me on the shoulder and said he liked to hear the language spoken in the house.* (195)

This act of sharing the secret, knowing that the father will fail to understand the message, temporarily allows the narrator to fulfil both his own and his mother’s needs. The narrator feels the sense of “relief” which Vincent indirectly hints at when he talks about the possibility of revealing the truth to someone in order to counter the unease people may experience when they are in possession of a secret (164).

After his parents’ death, the narrator is finally able to tell the truth about his family history, and writing his autobiography becomes a way for him to cope with the deeply troublesome secret he had kept to himself for so many years in order to remain loyal to his mother. Hence, the autobiographical account of the first-person narrator’s childhood turns into a rehabilitation of his uncle
Eddie. At the same time, however, the writing process, similar to his translation of the story into Irish as a young boy, serves as a healing process for the narrator, as a means of liberation releasing the pressure “swollen inside” him for so long (Reading 194).

In the autobiography by McCourt, Frank, the narrator of Angela’s Ashes, paints a very private and at times cynical picture of his immensely disturbing and “miserable Irish Catholic childhood” in Limerick (1). Throughout the narrator’s childhood and early teenage years described in the text, the family suffers from ineffable poverty and constantly borders on starvation. Malnutrition and pneumonia actually kill three of the narrator’s younger siblings, while Frank himself has to be hospitalised at one stage. Diagnosed with typhoid fever, he is lucky to survive. In addition to these hardships, he and his younger brother, Malachy, are often faced with discrimination and racism because their father is originally from the north and the two boys, who were born and spent the first few years of their lives in New York, have an American accent when the family first arrives in Limerick. Stressing the bleak, sombre atmosphere and the lack of comforts experienced in the city in the private account of his childhood, the narrator exposes the hardship and deprivation he and his family endure and clearly identifies the different forces responsible for the horrible conditions they live in:

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. [...] People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years. (1)

Retelling or reinventing episodes from his own childhood by exploring memories of his “private subjective [reality],” the narrator seems aware that the point of view chosen in his autobiographical account is hardly compatible with public discourse (Kenneally 116). In fact, Angela’s Ashes serves as a typical example of an Anglo-Irish autobiography where, according to Wally, “traumatising events of Irish history are extensively treated [...] in order to alter, rectify or add to the already established historiographic discourse” (140). As my reading of Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man will show, the criticism expressed in Angela’s Ashes recalls Stephen Dedalus’ uncompromising separation and renunciation of the different power institutions – namely the family, the nation and the church – in Irish society.22

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22 Joyce’s use of space and his criticism of the different centres of power are discussed in Chapter III (p. 70–83).
The narrator in *Angela’s Ashes* illustrates that the nationalist movement aimed at decolonising Ireland by freeing it from English rule and influence. However, he stresses that, during his upbringing in the Irish Free State, the same mechanisms of power and control were used by the nationalists and the Irish Catholic Church.

Frank accuses the institutions in power of harshness and argues that for ordinary people nothing changed after the foundation of the republic. In fact, whenever his nationalist father – deeply afflicted with the Irish problem, ‘the drink,’ as the narrator calls it – returns home from wasting the family’s entire weekly wages in a single night at the pub, singing songs of Roddy McCorley and Kevin Barry, he makes the narrator and his younger brothers promise to die for Ireland. Priests, on the other hand, repeatedly declare what “a glorious thing [it is] to die for the Faith,” finally causing the young boy to wonder if anyone ever cares about his well-being, about how to make life worth living, and amidst the misery he finds himself in and the numerous childhood deaths in the family, about how to survive in this country (*Angela’s Ashes* 124). School is another institution largely failing to enhance a young boy’s possibilities. Teaching takes the form of Catholic catechism; the students’ first and foremost task is to repeat exactly what the master says. This manifestation of power once again highlights that independent minds are unwelcome and almost invariably lead to trouble. A young boy in Frank’s class who requires an explanation of the Catholic concept of ‘sanctifying grace,’ is strongly advised by the master not to interrogate or probe him: “There are too many people wandering the world asking questions and that’s what has us in the state we’re in and if I find any boy in this class asking questions I won’t be responsible for what happens” (130). The only exception in Frank’s school career is Mr O’Halloran, the headmaster of the school, who encourages individual thinking among his students:

> You have to study and learn so that you can make up your own mind about history and everything else but you can’t make up an empty mind. Stock your mind, stock your mind. It is your house of treasure and no one in the world can interfere with it. If you won the Irish Sweepstakes and bought a house that needed furniture would you fill it with bits and pieces of rubbish? Your mind is your house and if you fill it with rubbish from the cinemas it will rot in your head. You might be poor, your shoes might be broken, but your mind is a palace. (236–237)

In fact, the autobiographical account of the early years of his life seems to be the narrator’s actual process ‘of making up his own mind’ about his youth in the west of Ireland. Again the cathartic aspect of the narrative process has to be emphasised. By publishing the story of his childhood, Frank identifies the groups responsible for repressing and dispossessing parts of the population in the same way that the British occupiers had done before them.
Frank’s private message is that life at the time was desperate and, in opposition to the public point of view, his text indicates that circumstances could have been different if power had not been abused. Moreover, the misery might have been alleviated had steps been taken once the problem was recognised. As his father is on the dole during most of Frank’s early childhood, the family receives some support from the St. Vincent de Paul Society. In order to decide whether the family is indeed entitled to the food they are given, two representatives come to visit them in their home. As the two men are led to the upper floor of their house, they are “careful the way they step into the lake in the kitchen” downstairs (113). To avoid the water and the dampness of this room during winter, the family have withdrawn to the upper part of the house, which they have begun to refer to as ‘Italy.’ The narrator witnesses how amused the two men are by Malachy’s pride of ‘living in Italy,’ shaking their heads as they leave the family saying “God Almighty and Mother of God, this is desperate. That’s not Italy they have upstairs, that’s Calcutta” (114). Thus, although the narrator originally suggests that in his opinion “nothing can compare with the Irish version” of childhood, the comment by these two men reveals a condescending, colonial attitude towards India, the only place in the world one would expect to be in as bad a state as Ireland (1). Another reference to India is made when Frank’s father goes to the Town Hall to complain that their home is badly afflicted with flies and rats because the only lavatory of the lane is situated directly next to the entrance of their house. As a result of the dominant role which religion plays in the country, Frank’s father calls for different standards than those in India:

Dad says: This is not India. This is a Christian Country. The lane needs more lavatories. The man says, Do you expect Limerick to start building lavatories in houses that are falling down anyway, that will be demolished after the war? Dad says that lavatory could kill us all. The man says we live in dangerous times. (241–242)

When the harsh and cynical public voice represented by the civil servant in the Town Hall is taken into consideration, it comes as no surprise that no remedy is taken. This short episode highlights the private truth that voices and realities of slum-dwellers are neither respected nor valued in the society depicted.

Moreover, a comment made by a neighbour of the McCourt family underlines how successful the teachings of the Catholic Church have been in inducing a feeling of guilt in people as soon as someone dares speak the (private) truth. One day, when drinking tea with her neighbour Bridey, Frank’s mother Angela mentions that she does not know “under God” how to cope with the little amount of money they have (162). When the neighbour praises God, Angela declares that she is convinced that “God is good for someone somewhere but He hasn’t been seen lately in the lanes of Limerick” (162). Although Bridey
laughs, she reminds Frank’s mother that for such an ungrateful comment “you could go to hell” (162). Referring to her personal experience and truth, Angela quips: “Aren’t I there already, Bridey?” (162) The moral teachings of the church fail to silence Frank’s agonised and desperate mother – she has reached a stage where the truth is no longer repressed by shame, guilt or fear.

In the private response to his childhood years, not only does the narrator pass judgement on the various power institutions in Ireland, but he also reflects on family life and its dysfunctional aspects. He meticulously describes his father’s drunkenness and the effects the father’s addiction has on the entire family; nonetheless, the narrator never rebukes his father. His father’s manners are presented as a reality Frank simply grows up with. Still, through Frank’s detailed portrayal, secret and hidden pieces of family life are revealed. Despite “a lack of tea or bread in the house,” the father always finds ways to finance his pints (153), even if this means, in the opinion of the narrator’s mother, going “beyond the beyonds,” by drinking the money which the narrator’s grandfather in the North sent after a new baby is born (210).

Without directly blaming either of his parents, the narrator emphasises that no matter how broke the family might be, mother and father “always manage to get the fags, the Wild Woodbines. They have to have the Woodbines in the morning and anytime they drink tea. They tell us every day we should never smoke, it’s bad for your lungs, it’s bad for your chest, it stunts your growth, and they sit by the fire puffing away” (153).

The family’s deprivation more often than not goes hand in hand with a lack of intimacy and kindness amongst the different members of the family. As in Sean O’Casey’s plays where no strong bonding between the members of a family exists, social pressure and demeanour are identified as two sources of disagreement and unease spreading within the family and undermining the care and love with which the parents treat their children. Thus, regardless of the fact that the members of this community do not live in tenements, social condensation among them is still strong. Inhabiting houses in the same lane means that this community is representative of a society, as described by Sofsky, where the different members of a community all participate in each other’s private lives witnessing their neighbours’ ups and downs:

> Where everyone knows everyone else, privacy can scarcely be maintained. The more closely woven the social network is, the more oppressive the proximity of others. Conversely, the more loopholes there are in the social network, the greater the individual’s freedom. So long as people live in closed groups with strong ties, in a remote village […] their relationships are close and manageable. However, established groups and outsiders pay for this closeness with a loss of freedom. A change in one’s social group seems impossible. Being completely integrated means being bound by social fetters. Nothing is hidden from the attention of neighbors, the clan, or the
As a consequence of the constant observation by others, interaction between the parents in Angela’s Ashes is often characterised by harsh undertones. The father is constantly afraid of being disgraced or feeling ashamed in front of the neighbours, especially when his wife accepts charity from organisations or begs a shop-owner for a Christmas meal. Anxious to preserve a sense of dignity in life, he is careful never to swear in front of the children. The mother, on the other hand, feels primarily disgraced by her husband’s drinking problem and his inability to support the family financially. While some families in the lane anxiously await the arrival of the telegram boys delivering the weekly earnings which the fathers send from England during the war, others are less lucky:

The families that get the early telegrams have that contented look. They’ll have all day Saturday to enjoy the money. They’ll shop, they’ll eat, they’ll have all day to think about what they’ll do that night […]. There are families don’t get the telegram every week and you know them by the anxious look. (Angela’s Ashes 253–254)

Much to the narrator and his family’s shame and humiliation, as this weekly ritual is followed by the keen eyes of the entire community surrounding them, the telegram boys – except for the odd time – normally bypass their house.

At times, the atmosphere between the parents becomes so tense that communication between them breaks down entirely, and Frank understands that one should not disrespect the powerful and reproachful silence. In a very innocent manner, the young narrator explains that such silence is no reason to worry; lack of communication, rows and shame are perfectly representative of the community in Limerick in general:

People in families in the lanes of Limerick have their ways of not talking to each other and it takes years of practice. There are people who don’t talk to each other because their fathers were on opposite sides in the Civil War in 1922. […] There are families that are ashamed of themselves because their forefathers gave up their religion for the sake of a bowl of Protestant soup during the Famine and those families are known ever after as soupers. […] In every lane, there’s always someone not talking to someone or everyone not talking to someone or someone not talking to everyone. (146–147)

Hence, although the reasons given for a lack of communication and silence in the two autobiographies differ considerably, inarticulateness is yet again a key characteristic of the disadvantaged Irish minority. The writing process, however, allows the first-person narrators in Reading in the Dark as well as in Angela’s Ashes to move beyond the muteness of their childhoods. It provides them with an opportunity to construct their own self and identity retro-